Stranger Things- December 1983 by Brandolyn

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Summary: What happened between the disappearance of the Demogorgon at Hawkins Middle School and the 'One Month Later' end of the season 1 finale.

1. Chapter 1- Remembering Eleven

Hawkins Indiana- December 1983

Mike Wheeler dreamed of monsters and darkness, black suits and blood. He dreamed of car chases, Demogorgons, eggos and- his first kiss.

Mike woke with a start, his heart pounding in his chest. He wiped the sleep from his eyes and sat up in bed trying to separate the dream from the nightmare. While he focused, Mike's mind cleared and he realized both the dream and the nightmare was real. Despite the blankets enveloping him, Mike couldn't suppress the shiver that shook his body.

He remembered Will. And how Eleven had helped save him.

The clock on the nightstand blinked 3:15pm. "I slept the whole day? El's going to be starving!" Mike threw off his blankets, to race to the basement to apologize. But once he reached the door he stopped. His skin prickled, as another memory washed over him like a wave of cold water. He felt as though someone had gripped his heart and squeezed.

They- himself, Lucas, Dustin, Eleven, Chief Hopper, Joyce, Johnathan and Nancy- had broken into Hawkins Middle School and made a sensory deprivation tank. With it, Eleven had found Will in the Upside Down, and when Joyce and Hopper, and then Johnathan and Nancy had run off to find him, Mike had made plans: Eleven would move in to his house. He promised her a bed, real food, and a family.

Mike remembered how curious she was about pudding and the way she screwed up her face when he explained what it was.

They made plans to go to the Snow Ball together.

There was another squeeze around his heart. His palms grew wet and clammy as he held tight to his bedroom doorknob and thought of their kiss.

"Then the Bad Men came," Mike whispered to the lonely room. *He thought of how brave she had been to stay by his side, how strong and loyal she was. She protected them- him, Lucas and Dustin. Even when the white haired man; the one she called 'Papa', came. When he tried to take her away, she had turned from him and reached out, crying for Mike instead.*

Then the Demogorgon found them. Dustin had been the only one strong enough to carry her. He had hurried Eleven from the hallway into M. Clark's science classroom.

After that, it found them again, and once more, Eleven protected them.

And then- she was gone.

Mike stepped into the hall and descended the stairs in a daze. He couldn't believe everything that had happened.

Downstairs, Mike's father was talking on the phone in the kitchen, and didn't notice his son had finally come out of his room. In the living room, all the Wheeler women looked up, noticing Mike's soft footsteps coming down the stairs.

"How are you feeling Michael?" his mother asked, spinning away from the shelf she was dusting. Mike looked past her, walking slowly to the basement. "Michael?" she repeated.

Nancy put down her book. "It's okay mom. I'll go." She offered her mother an encouraging smile and followed Mike to the basement. She found him standing by the table where he and his friends would play Dungeons and Dragons, staring at a blanket fort in the corner of the room.

He was still as a statue, and hadn't moved for a few minutes when Nancy cleared her throat. She bowed her head and asked softly, looking at the makeshift bed, "I never heard what happened," she paused before admitting, "but yesterday at the hospital, I heard you tell Will that she's gone."

Mike shrugged. "She saved us," he whispered. His voice hitched and Nancy reached an arm around to hug him. They stayed quiet, staring

at Eleven's 'room' until Nancy told Mike what had happened after she and Johnathan had left them at the middle school.

She explained how they had gone back to the Byers's home to kill the monster, how they lured it with blood- she showed off the scabbed over laceration on her palm. She explained how they had caught the monster in a bear trap and set it on fire, "but it still got away.

Earlier in the week Dustin had said, *'Nancy's pretty much a bad ass now,'* but Mike hadn't truly believed it until now.

"After you and Johnathan left, we took care of her," Mike shivered. "She was exhausted, cold and scared- but I was looking out for her. She was finally safe," he said proud. Quietly, he added to himself, "*We were going to go to the Snow Ball…"* He wiped his nose on a sleeve. "And then the Bad Men found us."

"Who?"

"The Bad Men. The ones who kept her a secret, who kept her locked away and forced her to find the Demogorgon." Mike's brow creased. Nancy didn't understand all of what Mike was saying but she nodded along anyway. "She saved us from the bad men- but it was too much. It wiped her out. She wouldn't even wake up!" Mike sounded scared as he retold the story. "We got her out. We had her back- like she had ours."

"And then?"

"It came." Mike's voice was serious. He trembled remembering the Demogorgon: its slimy blue skin, how it walked hunched over- like a man with too many vertebrae, and the clicking noise it made as it turned to them. "Lucas tried to fight it off, but it was too strong. She had to step in- I begged her not to-" Mike looked up to Nancy with big, watery eyes, "she fought it back. It was like she was tearing it apart from the inside, dissolving it with her mind." Mike leaned into Nancy who was still holding him tight. "*She* was screaming. *It* was screaming. And when it went quiet- they were gone."

"Gone?" Nancy asked. "Both of them?" Mike nodded. Nancy tried to ask her next question as tactfully as possible- and failed. "Does that

mean they're dead?"

The question stung and Mike winced, but he forced himself to shrug and answer, "They were just gone."

The siblings stayed quiet a moment longer until the sounds of their mother preparing dinner grew too loud to ignore.

"Are you ready to go upstairs, so mom can stop worrying about you?" Nancy asked. Mike nodded. As Nancy's arms fell away from him, Mike reached out and squeezed her uninjured hand- a silent 'thank you' for her support- and followed her from the basement.

2. Chapter 2- No Evidence

Mike, Lucas and Dustin returned to school the Monday following the Demogorgon's disappearance. They'd been allowed to visit Will in the hospital, but weren't allowed to hang out after school, everyone's parents were on edge after the newspaper headlines over the weekend "***Dead Boy- Alive Again".*** The boys' parents had decided to drive them to and from school- under the pretense that the deep snow would be too much for their bikes. Today Lucas's mother was driving the carpool.

The ride to school was abnormally quiet. The boys all exchanged curious looks, wondering how the school could possibly be open only days after it had been destroyed by the Demogorgon and the Bad Men's attack. They said a polite 'Thank you' to Lucas's mother as they climbed out of her station wagon and turned to the school apprehensive.

"I can't believe it's open," Dustin said looking up at the school.

"I bet half the school is roped off," Lucas added.

"How do you suppose they're passing off all the damage? You think they'll say it was a B&E by vandals?"

Everyone shrugged and walked up to the front entrance of the school. Stepping into the halls of Hawkins Middle School, Mike, Lucas and Dustin looked around in amazement. There were no signs of blood stains in the halls, or bullet holes in the walls. Even the spot in the wall where the Demogorgon had burst through the brick looked undamaged; the painting of the school mascot on the wall even looked aged and was peeling. There wasn't a single sign that anything had happened over the weekend. Dustin walked up to the wall slowly, assessing it. He patted the brick, picked at the paint and ran his hands over it before turning to Lucas and Mike amazed.

"How can it look perfect? It was a giant hole two days ago!"

Mike shook his head and Lucas muttered something about 'the man' and conspiracy theories.

The rest of the day went by as normal, with the exception that there were far more eyes that followed all three boys through the halls and glared across the lunchroom at them. Everyone seemed afraid of them, even their bullies seemed to be giving them more space than usual.

It wasn't until last period- Science with Mister Clark -that the day got weird. Mike seemed to slow as they approached the Science room. His best friends slowed to match his pace and stood on either side as they entered the room. Mike took two steps into the class and stopped. His eyes looked to the workbenches that should have been destroyed and the chalkboard that was so recently smashed in the outline of the Demogorgon. This was the last place he had seen Eleven. All four boys felt the sickening feeling in their guts from standing in the room where their friend had given her life. It felt wrong that no one else in the room would ever know.

"Boys? Is everything alright?" Mister Clark asked watching them as they hovered just inside his classroom. He got up from behind his desk and approached, as Lucas and Dustin turned to Mike who looked pale, and then back to their teacher concerned. Mister Clark knelt in front of Mike and spoke softly, "You don't look well Mister Wheeler. Maybe you boys should escort Michael to the nurse."

"No." Mike shook the image of the Demogorgon from his head. "I'm fine." He hoisted his bag higher on his shoulders and led the others to their regular seats at the front of the class.

Throughout the lesson, Dustin couldn't keep his eyes from wandering, he even crawled under the desks at one point trying to find any evidence of the destruction of the room. Mister Clark had to ask him to return to his seat twice. Two seats over, Mike had his text book open and looked as though he was taking notes, but his eyes never focused on anything in the room. His mind was very far away. Beside him, Lucas focused on the teacher who was paying close attention to Mike. Every time Mister Clark watched Mike too long or looked as though he were getting ready to ask Mike a question, Lucas's hand would shoot up into the air ready to distract the teacher with a convoluted question about the lesson.

When the end of day bell rang, Mike was glad to leave. He waved a

half-hearted goodbye to Mister Clark and followed Dustin and Lucas to the parking lot. "I don't get it!" Dustin exclaimed as they waited for their ride. "How can they do that?" He pulled his hat down over his ears in his frustration. "It looks like none of it ever happened!"

"But it did happen," Mike said.

Lucas clasped Mike on the shoulder. "We know." He reached out to Dustin too. "They may have covered up what happened here, but we know the truth. And we won't forget."

3. Chapter 3- Hawkins High

Nancy held her books tight to her chest as she passed Barb's locker. Every time she passed that locker, Nancy looked at the notes taped to it from Barb's friends. 'I miss you' and 'hope you're safe' were the messages in most of the notes. But as she passed, Nancy noticed a new note and stopped to read it- it was *not* wishing Barb well. Nancy ripped the scrap of paper from the locker and crumpled it in one hand.

No one else- other than Jonathan- knew that Barb was dead. The story around Hawkins was that she had run away, but even though they didn't know the truth, Nancy refused to put up with this kind of insensitivity. She glared at the students lining the hall, watching for anyone who looked guilty, but no one paid her any attention. No one had even noticed she'd pulled a note from Barb's locker.

Nancy was early for class, as usual, but Steve was already waiting for her sitting next to her regular seat at the front of the class. He raised his eyebrows at her playfully. "You're late Wheeler."

"No I'm not." She glanced at the clock above the door to make sure and blushed as she took her seat.

"I was here first. That makes you late," Steve teased. Nancy giggled and nudged him with her shoulder.

The rest of their class trickled into the classroom over the next few minutes, but it wasn't until Ms. Cochrane, the English teacher, came in and settled herself behind the desk that Nancy noticed a familiar silhouette pass by the classroom. She jumped from her seat, startling both her teacher and Steve. "Jonathan!" she called, racing into the hall after him.

Jonathan Byers turned surprised, "Nancy?"

"Hi," she sounded embarrassed. "I didn't mean to scare you. I just, I wanted to ask about Will. How's he doing?"

"Oh." Jonathan smiled, but didn't look Nancy in the eyes. He focused

on her hands as he spoke, occasionally glancing up to her face and then back down. "He's been home for a few days, back to school today- he's excited. I think he's been bored at home."

"That's it? Back to normal?"

Jonathan shrugged his shoulders forward. "He hasn't slept alone since he got home, but otherwise," he shrugged again and his eyes flicked to Nancy's, "yeah."

"Good, good." Nancy smiled looking away down the hall.

"Nancy, are you okay?"

"Of course." She set her jaw determined and flashed him a smile. Her bright eyes almost twinkled, "I'm just glad Will's alright."

Jonathan saw through her charade. He adjusted his grip on the book bag slung over his shoulder. "What's wrong?" The bell rang and Nancy turned to leave. "Nancy!" He reached out and caught her hand. "What is it?"

Nancy's eyes were wide, but she didn't pull away from him. "I can't explain right now. Can we talk later?"

"Tomorrow?" Jonathan asked.

Nancy's feet shuffled. "Not tonight?"

"I promised my mother I'd paint the living room. But, it can wait…"

"No, no. It's fine. I'll see you tomorrow." With a nod, Nancy ducked back into her classroom leaving Jonathan alone in the hall feeling worried and confused. He looked into the classroom at Nancy, watching her, ignoring Steve's disapproving glare, until Ms. Cochrane closed the door and shooed him onto his next class.

******That night at the Byers House*****

Jonathan tipped the paint can into the tray as lights from the driveway turned his shadow into a hulking form on the wall behind him. For a second he thought the monster had returned, before the

headlights dimmed and the shadow disappeared.

A soft knock on the front door startled him as he stared at the spot on the wall where his shadow had been. The visitor knocked again, louder this time, and Jonathan pulled his eyes from the empty wall.

Standing on the Byers's front porch, wearing baggy sweat pants and an old t-shirt under her coat was Nancy. Her hair was pulled back into a ponytail. In her hands she carried a bag full of Tupperware, and a paint roller.

"What are you doing here?"

"Want some help?" Nancy asked. Jonathan was speechless but stepped aside to let her in. "Wow. It looks great in here." She remembered how she had seen this room last: lights hung from wall to wall, the alphabet had been painted on the main wall, the carpet was destroyed from bloodstains, gasoline and burn marks, and the furniture had been toppled and pushed aside. Now, it looked good as new. "I'm so sorry," she gasped looking around.

"For what?"

"We hunted that monster together. I know exactly how much damage we caused, but I never realized you'd have to fix it. I should have offered to help sooner."

Jonathan shook his head. "It would have been a lot messier without you. Besides, this place was already fixed up by the time Will woke up in the hospital."

Nancy looked shocked and mouthed silently, *who*?

Jonathan shrugged. "Feds, the State, Department of Energy? I don't know. But they put this place back exactly the way it was."

"But," Nancy looked to the walls of the living room confused. They had been stripped of wallpaper, and all the furniture had been pushed into the center of the room and covered with old sheets.

"They put up the same old wallpaper- Mom always hated it- so she tore it down."

"Well, I'm here to help now," she said, planting her hands on her hips.

"Ok, ok. You can start over here." Jonathan didn't ask her about what she'd wanted to talk about at school, but he didn't have to wait long. They talked about classes, and how weird it was pretending that everything was normal when they knew differently. "So many people have started talking to me. I thought everyone was just being friendly until I realized they just wanted to ask what really happened to Will."

"I'm sorry." Nancy hated that everyone treated Jonathan so badly, and her apology was an admission of guilt, since she knew she used to be just like them.

Jonathan shrugged it off, as always,and focused on painting the walls. Conversation lapsed back to Barb, then to how neither of them could sleep without a light on in their room, before Nancy went quiet again.

"What?"

Nancy put down her paint roller and sat on the sheet covered sofa in the middle of the room. She looked up to Jonathan desperate. "I don't know what to do."

"About Mike?"

"How'd you know?"

Jonathan sat next to her, "I have a little brother too."

She laughed, *of course he'd understand.* "Did you know Eleven destroyed that monster *by herself*?" she asked. Jonathan shook his head. He'd never heard what had happened, other than the boys telling Will '*it's gone now*' in the hospital. "It was chasing them. The boys couldn't fight it and they watched her destroy it. Mike, Lucas and Dustin… They watched. *She* was screaming- *it* was screaming… And then, they were gone. Both, Eleven and the monster…" Nancy remembered exactly how Mike had told her it had happened.

"They must have been terrified."

"I think he *loved* her Jonathan. He hasn't said it, and I'm not sure if he

realizes it himself, but Mike's heart broken. And now, he's spiraling. My mom sees it too, but she doesn't understand, and no one else knows what happened. And I don't know what to do." Her round blue eyes were abnormally large when she looked to him for help.

"You're doing it."

"No, I'm not doing anything."

"Look, my mom… she sometimes gets these episodes where she's not quite herself. She shuts down, spirals into herself. It's scary, but you just have to stick it out. Trust me. Stick around, remind him you're there for him and he'll come around."

"That's it?"

Jonathan nodded. He stared at his feet, "Sorry."

"No, no." Nancy shook her head. "That's really helpful. Thanks."

"You're welcome." They sat together a little while longer before Nancy got up to finish painting her wall.

"Do you have any music we can listen to while we work?"

Jonathan jumped up from the couch enthusiastically and raced to his room. He came back seconds later holding a record, "I think you're really going to like this." As he prepared the record on the player, Nancy realized she'd never seen him so excited, and it brought a real smile to her face.

4. Chapter 4- The Snow Ball

the week before Christmas

knock *knock*

In the living room, young Holly Wheeler hollered, like a guard dog alerting its family to the guest at the front door.

Karen Wheeler called from upstairs, "Someone answer the door! We're not quite ready yet!"

Nancy and Karen were upstairs, baby Holly was playing in the living room and Ted Wheeler was sitting in his reclining chair, reading the paper, leaving only Mike able to answer the door.

The door opened onto Steve, dressed in a new looking brown corduroy suit with matching striped brown tie. His hair was, as usual, windblown, as if he'd been driving with the windows down.

"Hi." Mike said politely. "Come in. She's almost ready." He opened the door wide to let Steve in from the cold and turned to shout up the stairs, "It's Steve!"

" 'Coming!" Nancy exclaimed. Excited footsteps followed her voice down the stairs. Both Mike and Steve watched Nancy's entrance. She wore a long sleeved peach coloured dress with a layered skirt. Her dark curly hair was blown out into waves and pinned behind her ears.

"Wow." Steve gasped. He pulled a corsage from behind his back and held it out for her. Nancy blushed as Steve held out the box for her. Mike tried not to notice that Steve's hand shook as he held the box.

Karen followed her daughter down the stairs and stood by Mike watching Steve and Nancy with pride. She made no attempt to pull Ted away from his reading.

Nancy was speechless as she pulled out the corsage made of white roses with the hint of blue forget-me-nots. She giggled as Steve slipped it onto her wrist. In turn, Nancy pinned a boutonniere made

of similar white flowers with mistletoe to his lapel. She shook just as badly as he had. They were excited, and Mike tried to be happy for them.

Standing together, Steve and Nancy looked like a picture from a magazine. Karen gushed over them, and finally snapped at Ted to get out the camera. While the adults were fighting, Nancy took a moment away from Steve and looked at Mike.

"You look sharp." She smiled at him, he was also dressed in a white dress shirt, dress pants, polished shoes and a black tie. He screwed up his face and looked away. "No really. You do."

"I don't look any different than I do going to a funeral, or going to church," Mike replied dully. He'd talked himself out of getting dressed so many times that night that he was amazed he'd put on his suit at all.

"Yes, you do." But Mike didn't believe her. "You don't have to go, if you don't want to," Nancy reiterated. "You look nice, but you can stay home if you want. Mom and Dad aren't going."

Mike rolled his eyes. The Snow Ball was a pre-Christmas Hawkins tradition. The middle school hosted the dance in the gymnasium and everyone was invited, but Mike and Nancy's parents had never gone. Karen had always used watching Nancy, Mike or Holly as an excuse not to go. He didn't know if they just didn't like to dance, or if the act of dancing was just too intimate for them, either way, they never went and Mike wanted to know what all the fuss was about.

Ted took a picture of Nancy and Steve, then one with Mike standing next to Nancy before they piled into Steve's car and drove to Hawkins Middle School.

Unfortunately for Mike, the Snow Ball was everything he had imagined. He knew it would have amazed Eleven- he doubted she'd ever seen anything like it. Paper snowflakes hung from the exposed metal beams of the gymnasium ceiling, there were two life-sized paper-mache snowmen flanking the entrance to the gym- Mike guessed El didn't even know what a snowman was, and the tables were draped in blue tablecloths, drizzled with glittering confetti to

make them look frosted. Even the snacks matched the theme: little marshmallow snowman kabobs, snowflake gingerbread cookies and there was a line up in the corner leading to a snow cone booth.

Mike found a seat while Nancy hurried Steve onto the dance floor. The music was loud and energetic, moving through the crowd like a force, propelling them to bounce and shake. It was pleasant enough for Mike, despite sitting alone, to watch his friends and neighbours dance like uncoordinated fools as he bit into a gingerbread snowflake. He felt alone so often that in this loud, crowded gym, he went pleasantly unnoticed. No one bugged him, no one stared. No one even came over to tease him for not having a date. It was peaceful- in a rowdy sort of way.

And then the loud, energetic music stopped and the lights dimmed. A man with a microphone announced a dance for all the '*happy couples celebrating tonight*' and half of the dancers left the dance floor in search of seats or snacks. Even Steve, Nancy, and their friends stopped dancing. It was mostly adults who dragged unwilling spouses into the middle of the room for this dance.

In a second, the lineup at the snow cone booth doubled, and so did the number of eyes that were turned on Mike. Mike tried very hard to ignore everyone looking at him now that everyone had stopped dancing, and focused on his sister instead. When her group had stopped dancing, Nancy had noticed Jonathan standing by the punch table.

Mike watched as she excused herself, "I just need a quick drink before the next song" and hurried over to Jonathan's side. She smiled, and laughed at a wry comment Jonathan made. Mike was too far away to hear what was said, but Nancy's laugh carried across the gymnasium and within moments Steve was beside her, romantically whisking her back onto the dance floor for the rest of the couple's dance.

Watching the couples sway in the dim lighting made Mike feel uneasy. He didn't want to watch this, and he didn't want to be here anymore. He wasn't sure if he'd have ever gotten the courage to ask El to dance with him, but he knew he'd wanted to. He shoved his hands into his pockets looking for the dime his mother had given him to call home for a ride, and left the gymnasium.

His head snapped up when he heard someone call his name. "Mike!" Jonathan was in the hallway too, his car keys dangling from one finger. He kept looking from the dance, to the parking lot as if he were in the middle of a big decision. "You okay?" he asked, pulling his attention away from the dance and the parking lot.

Mike shrugged. "Yeah. But I'm done now. I was about to call my mom."

"Need a ride home?"

"You aren't staying?"

Jonathan shook his head making his decision. His hair, which he'd parted away from his eyes for the occasion, fell out of place. "I'm done too. Go tell your sister, then we'll go."

Jonathan watched Mike cut a path through the dancers to interrupt Steve and Nancy. Nancy's head popped up searching the crowd for Jonathan. Mike pointed, drawing her gaze back to the gymnasium entrance. Jonathan tensed slightly as Nancy's eyes found him. She bowed her head, her curls bouncing slowly as she moved, and mouthed '*Thank You*'.

Jonathan, his shoulders hunched even in his grey suit, bowed back.

******At the Byers' house******

"You're home early," Joyce's voice called from the kitchen. "How was the dance?"

"Fine," Jonathan replied un-enthusiastically. "Is Will still up?"

Joyce nodded. "In his room."

Jonathan poked his head into his little brother's room with a soft, "Hey."

"Hi. How was the dance?" Will's bright eyes looked up from his latest drawing to his brother with excitement.

"Fine," Jonathan replied echoing his response in the kitchen. Will's

face fell. Jonathan leaned on the door frame. "I think Mike had a rough night. I drove him home and he didn't say anything, but… You or one of the guys might want to call him. Just to make sure he's okay."

"Oh." Will grabbed for his two way radio. "I will. Thanks." He'd already started calling for his friends when his brother left the room. "Dustin, come in Dustin. It's Will. Over."

The radio was silent for a moment before Will heard the familiar crackle of an incoming response. "Go for Dustin. Over."

"My brother says Mike had a bad night, but it's too late to call- Holly will be asleep by now. Can you buzz Lucas, see if he can reach him over the radio? Over."

"Copy. I'll reply with an update from Lucas. Over." Will heard Dustin call for Lucas, but Lucas's house was out of range of his radio, so he only heard garbled words and static as he replied to Dustin.

"Dustin for Will. No reply yet, but Lucas will keep trying. Over."

******At the Wheeler's house******

When Steve dropped Nancy at home, she answered her parents inquiries about the dance politely, describing the music, decor and food. "We danced a lot, so my feet are actually pretty sore. I'm just going to go to bed." She kissed her mother on the cheek and trotted upstairs.

Nancy unpinned her hair, changed into a light green night gown and washed her face. Passing the closed door to Mike's room on her way to bed Nancy couldn't supress the need to check on him. She knocked softly and opened the door. "Mike, are you feeling any better?"

The empty bed was like a flashing neon sign answering her question 'NO'. After a quick trip back to her room, Nancy quietly crept past her parents, to the basement where she found Mike wrapped in a sleeping bag, laying in El's blanket fort. "Hey," she said.

Mike looked up at her but didn't answer.

Nearby, Mike's radio buzzed. "Lucas to Mike. Come in Mike. I know you're there. Answer me. Over."

Lucas tried twice more, but when Mike didn't move to answer the radio, Nancy reached out and answered instead, "Mike's asleep. Try him in the morning." There was a long pause when no one spoke over the radio.

"You have to say 'Over' when you're done," Mike's muffled voice said through the blankets.

"Oh." Nancy held the speak button again. "Over."

"Copy. Mike's asleep. Over and Out."

The basement went quiet again.

"Thanks," Mike mumbled.

"Why didn't you just turn it off?" There was an awkward silence while Mike debated whether he should tell Nancy that there was still a part of him that was hoping that Eleven wasn't dead. And, if she was still alive somehow, she might try to reach him through the radio- like Will had. He decided to tell her, and she didn't say anything. Nancy just nodded, as if it was what she had expected to hear.

She lay down beside Mike and pulled another blanket over herself, snuggling up beside her brother. "Is that what you meant when you said she was *just gone*?"

Mike nodded. "What if she didn't die? What if she's just stuck in the Upside Down? She can see me, but I can't see her." He explained to Nancy what the Upside down was like, just as Will had described it.

"I remember." Nancy shuddered and Mike rolled closer to her. "I was there, looking for Barb. It was awful."

"El could be trying to get out, or to reach me. She could be in danger. What if she needs help," Mike rambled. "I don't know what to do," he sighed.

"It sounds like there isn't a lot to do," Nancy offered, although

unhelpfully. "But, if she is *stuck*, you can try to make things more comfortable for her." Mike looked at his sister in confusion as she slid the white corsage off her wrist and placed it in a corner of the fort. "Now, maybe *that place*,"

"The Upside Down," Mike supplied.

"Right. Now, maybe the Upside Down might not be quite so dark and scary." After a moment of silence, Nancy leaned back and said softly, "I'm sorry you didn't get to go to the Snow Ball together."

Mike nodded. "Thanks."

"Come on, it's time for bed," Nancy said patting Mike's arm.

Mike's hands tensed around his blanket. "Not yet." He shook his head and his jaw clenched- the Wheeler sign of toughness. "I want to stay a little longer."

Nancy sighed and set her jaw- just like her brother. "Okay, just a little longer," and she climbed back into the fort and lay down beside him.

"What are those flowers?" Mike asked, admiring the corsage. The thought of El looking at flowers confused, wondering what use they could have, crinkled the corners of his mouth.

"White roses; they symbolize innocence and hope, and forget-me-nots."

He chuckled. "That's perfect."

"I thought so too." Nancy closed her eyes and let Mike lean into her. She listened as his breathing relaxed, and he drifted off to sleep.

5. Chapter 5- Christmas

The hope that Eleven might still be alive spread quickly, and the boys took it upon themselves to make the Upside Down as friendly as possible. Before Christmas, Mike and Nancy had decorated El's 'room', Nancy added a Frosty the Snowman blanket to the bed, and Mike had hung a stocking, garlands, tinsel and colourful tree lights, on top of setting out a small stack of presents in the corner beside his two way radio.

On Christmas Eve, when the boys came over for a quick game of Dungeons and Dragons, everyone brought a little trinket to leave in Eleven's room. Even Will, who had never met her, but had been fascinated with her through all their stories brought a box of eggos as a thank you for all of her help. They exchanged their own gifts, and laughed as they finished a silly Christmas themed campaign trying to save Santa Claus from a thessalhydra.

"Merry Christmas!" the boys exclaimed when the campaign ended and Jonathan came to drive everyone home. They all raced upstairs, except for Mike.

Mike lingered on the stairs looking at El's room. "Merry Christmas Eleven," he whispered. He waited a moment, wishing she'd answer him, imagining that she was just out of reach, before climbing the stairs two at a time to join everyone else.

Christmas at the Byers

Will had unwrapped a camera; the present from Nancy, on their car ride home, and Jonathan was using it to document the happy season. He followed his mother around the dining room as she set the table, taking pictures of every dish. The Byers home was modestly decorated with a tree and stockings, but the dinner table was full of food which Jonathan and Will were eager to devour.

But this dinner was not as happy as Will wished. He'd felt ill just before eating and rushed to the bathroom where his world changed forever. After seeing the Upside Down, Will returned to Christmas dinner with his mother and brother, pretending like nothing had

happened. Once dinner had finished, he raced to his room and dove under the bed looking for his radio. He begged his friends to sneak out and meet back at Mike's house.

The Wheelers

Mike held open the basement door as his friends raced in and shook the snow from their hats and stomped it from their boots. Will was the last to arrive. Mike, Lucas and Dustin waited on the couch. Dustin's feet tapped nervously as he waited for Will to kick off his boots.

"What's so important that we had to sneak out?" Lucas' voice was harsh, but the moment Will pulled the scarf from his face and they saw the fear in his eyes, everyone went quiet.

"What is it Will?" Mike asked.

"I... I saw it..."

"Saw what?" Dustin asked. He held tight to the edge of the couch waiting for Will's response.

"The other place..." Will spoke in a whisper. He looked around afraid, afraid that if he closed his eyes, he might end up there again.

"You saw the Upside Down?" Mike asked, "How?"

Will shuddered and Lucas handed him an old yellow blanket. "I don't know. I was feeling sick before dinner, went to the washroom, and..." His pause pulled the other boys closer. He looked scared and guilty. An encouraging nod from Mike convinced him to continue. "I started coughing and I coughed up something... like a slug." He shuddered. "It slid down the drain before I could grab it, and when I looked in the mirror I was back in the Upside Down."

"How did you get back?" Asked Lucas.

Will shrugged. "I was only there for a second, just long enough to look out my window..."

"And?"

"I saw something out there. Something, *big*."

"The demogorgon?" Lucas inhaled.

"I thought El destroyed that thing?" Mike turned to his friends.

"The demogorgon wasn't *that big*." Dustin noted.

"Did you noticed anything else?" Mike wondered. He was thinking of Eleven, but Will shook his head.

"I was only there for a second."

"But that thing you saw, it's stuck in the Upside Down right?" Dustin looked around but everyone else looked unsure. "Do you think it's coming for you?"
Mike shot Dustin a disapproving glare.

Will shrugged. "What if it happens again? What if I blink and I end up back there and get stuck again? I can't go back there." The shiver that shook his shoulders passed through the basement.

"It's okay Will. We won't let anything happen to you." Mike said sitting tall. Lucas stayed quiet but looked confused. He spread his arms, silently asking, *How?*

"I'm with you Mike," Dustin nodded, "I don't want anything to happen to you Will, but, what are we going to do? It's in the Upside Down..."

Mike jumped up and slammed his hands down on the table. "We've gotta do something! What if we tell someone? Like Hopper or your mom. It's still out there and we have to stop it!" Like so many times before, during Dungeons and Dragons campaigns, the boys jumped to their feet, inspired by Mike's words. Their cry of 'Yeah!' echoed in the basement. Mike hushed them, and they fell silent, listening for footsteps upstairs.

Lucas turned to Mike, "What's the plan?"

"We have to find a way to get to the Upside Down before whatever Will saw can make it's way here." The boys looked weary, but they nodded in unison.

Static over the two-way radio made each boy jump. They all turned toward El's blanket fort-room. They turned to Mike and back, as static buzzed through the basement again.

Dustin's mouth hung wide as a young girl's voice mixed in with the static.

"*No*." She pleaded. "*It's too dangerous*."

They looked from each other, over to Mike's radio sitting in Eleven's room. Dustin's mouth hung open as a familiar, young, female voice called out through the static.

Mike raced over to the radio. "ELEVEN?" He shouted. The others crouched around him. Dustin couldn't help bouncing around in his excitement as Mike called for their friend. "Eleven? Is that you? Are you okay? Can you hear me? Over."

"*Mike...*" the radio was quiet for a moment, "*it's not safe*."

"We know! Will saw that *thing* in the Upside Down. What's happening? Do you need help? What can we do? Over."

The two-way radio stayed quiet.

"Tell her about Will." Lucas suggested.

"Is she coming back?" Dustin looked around the group hopefully.

"El, something's happening to Will. We need to protect him. What can we do? Can you help us? Over."

Still the radio stayed quiet.

"El... we need your help."

The static over the radio returned, and a screech like roar followed a whispered, "*yes*." The roar caused a chill to settle in the Wheeler's basement. "*I... can't...*"

Dustin looked up to the ceiling concerned, as Mike called over the radio again. "Eleven? EL!" He shouted into the silent radio. He turned

it off and on again, shouting for their lost friend.

"At least we've still got Eleven on our side," Lucas supplied when it was obvious she wasn't going to answer.

"If she didn't just get eaten," Will said, skeptical.

"But did she mean 'yes' she's going to help us, or 'yes' we need help?" Dustin asked disbelieving. All four boys looked to the two-way radio. They sat in nervous silence contemplating their upcoming challenge.

"We'll find out soon I guess," Mike shrugged.

The others nodded, and quietly started to pull on their snow boots and jackets.

Surrounded by his best friends, and encouraged by their bravery, Will broke the silence with a nervous smile, "Merry Christmas guys."